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"GODFESSION TUNES": AN ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS CALLER TUNES AND TEXT MESSAGES OF MTN, IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Subscribers of Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN) in Nigeria are increasingly experiencing a daily influx of text messages from their service provider. A number of these messages come in form of advertisements for customers to subscribe to or buy certain products on offer. In recent times, emphases have shifted from pure cowlmercial products to include a catalogue of religious products. This paper relies on the market theory and the concept of everyday life to analyze data from text massages of MTN subscribers, interviews and discussions with a selected number of MTN subscribers. The paper demonstrates that the emergent interest in the provision and consumption of religiously based caller tunes, prayers and sermons is a response to the increasing religiosity of Nigerians due largely to a number oHactors which the paper illustrates .

KEYWORDS: Religion, Caller tunes, MTN Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The caption"Godfession tunes" in the title of this paper is a reflection of the types of text messages received by MTN subscribers in Nigeria as offers for a variety of religious products advertised by MTN. Godfession is a term introduced by CokerGoke (2012) in his book *God'fessions : Daily Confessions of God's Word and* PromIses *over Your Life*. The word originated from the merging of two words 'God' and 'confession'. According to the author, believing and confessing (of God's word) are an important part of a Christian's walk and what becomes manifest in the lives of Christian's depends on their faith and confession both of which must align with God's word

From its first use in a book series, the term has now developed into an App which could be downloaded and used on one's phone, iphones, tablets, etc. and which enables users to receive a daily alert of Godly confessions in various languages. (More information on the God'fessions App, the book and how the term can be

appropriated in everyday life can be found on http://www.godfessions.com/.).

Such messages usually sent weekly, monthly or seasonally as the occassion arises, show the interplay between religion, mass communication and telecomunication in Nigeria. MTN, an acronym for Mobile Telecommunication Network is a South African registered mobile company which started operation in Nigeria in 1999. It is so far the largest telecommunication network in Nigeria with a population coverage of over 61.0 million subscribers (as at March 2015). According to information from its student guide curriculum, MTN provides several services such as GSM calls, text messages, and message express. Other products provided by MTN include updates on activities such as sports news, mobile financial services and health tips. Besides these secular services, MTN has in recent times introduced a number of inspirational quotes and religious (faith based) products. Examples of these products are MTN religious caller tunes, religious ring tones, daily prayers, prophetic messages and special sermons by religious leaders and/or founders. Responses to such advertisements are apparent in a number of religious caller tunes currently in use by subscribers. This raises a number of questions such as: why does MTN, a purely commercial organization provide religious products and services to its subscribers? What could account for the growing interest in religious caller tunes, prayers and sermons on the handset by Nigerians? This paper is based on three main sources of data namely: Monthly collection of MTN religious text messages collected between April 2014 and January 2015; interviews and discussions with several subscribers of MTN Nigeria resident in Jos, and literature on the interplay between the mass media and telecommunication. Using the religious market theory and the concept of everyday life as theoretical tools of analysis, the paper shows the different types of religious products offered by MTN. It also describes how customers respond to MTN's offer and some of the factors that explain the growing interest in the provision and consumption ofreligiously based caller tunes, prayers and sermons in Nigeria.

Studies on Religion and the Mass Media

Within the last two decades, there have been ongoing researches on the subject of the influence of media on religion in the print and electronic media. According to Hackett (1998), “the appropriation of media by Pentecostals has transferred the meaning of religious practice in parts of Africa”. Ihejirika (2009: 2) also observes that

> In Africa, the growing scholarship in the field of media, religion and culture has started to increase as the interface between media and religion and culture in Africa is increasingly becoming of important interest among both African and international scholars .

Ihejirika demonstrates this point by giving a historical review of a number of scholarly works that foQus on media and culture from the t\vo decades of history of research in the interdisciplinary fields of religion and media in Mica,

Hackett and Soares (2015) further observe that the religious media scene in A&ica is rapidly evolving and this is evident in the proliferation of new media technologies as several religious leaders rely on these technologies to showcase their activities. In discussing the main goal of their book, the authors noted that studies on media and development in Africa have "almost always ignored religion in Africa despite the fact that religious actors have long been in the forefront in taking up new media technologies in Africa".

Since the turn of the new millennium, the world has witnessed a shift in emphasis from mainstream media to social media such as Facebook and Twitter which are easily accessible on handsets, tabloids and other electronic devices. According to C)manga (2015), the rapid rise in the use of mobile telephones and internet-enabled gadgets has resulted in social media becoming an important locus of social and political transformation in Africa. Commenting on the appropriationof twitter for policing in some comrnunities in Kenya, C)manga while citing Castells (2000: 15) notes that:

> The use of Twitter in Lanet Umoja shows how pre-existing networks and spaces of societal interaction can be refashioned by a new form of media. The Twitter network in Lanet Umoja provides insights on how technologies transform networks by enabling 'an unprecedented combination of flexibility and task implementation, of coordinated decision making, and decentralized execution, which provide a superior morphology for human action (Omanga 2015, https://www.stabilityjournal. org/articles/10.5334/sta.eq/, accessed 20/02/201 8).

Another important medium in this shift is the use of telecommunication services e.g. telephone calls and text messages via handsets which John Chesworth (2012) observes are increasingly changing the religious landscape in Kenya. Taiwo (2009) similarly demonstrates that :

> Mobile telephones open up a whole new world of opportunity for users as SMS enables them to organize and coordinate their social activities with relative ease. SMS also lends itself as an outlet for use by civil society organizations. Due to its communicative potential, it has been used for various socio-political activities in the past in Nigeria. For instance, it was used to mobilize the people

> against President Olusegun Obasanjo's desire for another political term after spending' the constitutionally required period as president. It was also used in 2003 by the National Association of GSM Subscribers of Nigeria and the Consumers Rights Project to organize mobile phone subscribers for a one-day boycott against their unreasonably high tariffs . . . It was also used at different times to raise awareness of the AIDS campaign by the National Agency for the Control ofAIDS (NACA) p. 191).

Taiwo's position shows how mobile telecommunicationis changing the African landscape in a variety of ways. It has helped in political processes and has been used as a tool for collective action and in creating of awareness on social issues affecting the society. However, the use of mobile telecommunication for religious purposes is a very recent innovation, thus, very little research on telecommunication and how it has influenced religious practices in Africa exists.

Nevertheless, Ibrahim (2017) in a recent study observed that "the variety of ways in which mobile phone technology has been appropriated as a religious medium among both Christians and Muslims is expanding" (p.280). He maintains that a growing body of literature on telecommunication is emerging as he gives examples of the works of several scholars who are contributing to this emergent expansion in literature. Ibrahim reiterated that "the intersection between religious practices and digital technologies is what Bell (2006, p.142) calls 'emergent techno-spirituality practices"'. (Ibrahim, 2017 p.281)

What has been understudied in researches on media and religion is how religion is influencing media practices in Africa and beyond. This study will therefore bridge this gap in research as it showcases how the resurgence of religion in the social media is influencing media policies and practices, thereby changing the dynamics of research on religion and telecommunication, as it provides very useful resource on the role ofreligion and telecommunication practice in Nigeria.

Categorizing MTN Religious Products and Services

There are different categories of MTN religious products as revealed by the variety of messages and ring/caller tunes on subscriber's phones. For the purpose of this study, a number of them were recorded, saved and transcribed from April 2014 to January 20 1 5 . Based on the data gathered within this period, the following categories of MTN religious products exist:

1) Caller Tunes

A caller tune is what a caller hears when they call one's phone, Because one has no control over the phone, it is not possible to ignore a caller tune. Tbis means that one is forced to listen to whatever exists as caller tune. Religious caller tunes have become common place among religious people in Nigeria. It is becoming so common that any time someone places a call, the caller is compelled to consume religion in various forms as these caller tunes are further categorized into Bible verses. h)nms. prayers and sermons. Examples ofthese groupings are discussed below:

d Bible Verses

Examples of caller tunes with Bible verses used by MTN subscribers are quotationsfrom the New King James Version of Matthew 6:9- 13 which is popularly known as The Lord's Prayer. When one places a call, the following Bible verses may be heard as one awaits a response “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Tby name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven, Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us”. This verse reflects how prayer is an important part of the daily lives of individuals. Together with the Apostles' Creed, it is a prayer that is recited every Sunday in most mainland churches in Nigeria. It is a reminder of how Christians ought to pray as taught by Jesus to His disciples. The Lord’s Prayer is a deeply loved and familiar invocation used by Christians worldwide.

Another popular Bible verse used by MTN is the King James Version of Psalms 23 which reads; “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still water; He restoreth my soul, He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His names' sake, Yea though I walk through the valley ofthe shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. ..”. This Psalm in the Old Testament illustrates assurance of God's providence, guidance and protection. It is commonly recited by a number of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Nigeria as part ofthe benediction at the end ofthe church service.

b) Hymns

Hymns play a very important role in the lives of Christians and are an important part of most Church services the world over. In Nigeria, most church services are not complete without singing congregational hymns. There are a variety of hymn books and examples of these are the *Sacred Songs and Solos* (SSS), the *Revised Church Hyntnary* (RCH), *Ancient and Modern* and the *Baptist Hymnal* . Hymns are also categorized into various themes usually depicting appreciation, worship, services and consecration. So the choice of the day's hymns usually reflects the theme of the sermon for a particular Church service. The appropriation of hymns by MTN is an

indication that hymns play very important roles in the daily lives of Nigerian Christians. An example of hymns used by MTN is the chorus of the popular hymn "Great is Thy Faithfulness" which reads: "Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness, morning by morning new mercies I see, all I have needed thy handshave provided, great is thy faithfulness Lord unto me". This hymn is one of the most used hymns depicting God's faithfulness towards His Children. It further reflects God's sustaining and forgiving power in the lives of Christians.

C) Prayer

Similar to Bible verses on prayer are direct recorded prayers by celebrity "Men of God." A number of these prayers are prophetic in nature. It is important to note that prophetic prayers as opposed to other types of prayers play important roles in the lives ofmost Nigerian Christians. While prayer is central to the life of every religious person, a number of Nigerians rely on what is termed 'prophetic prayer,' usually offered by pastors or religious leaders who are considered men of God with prophetic callings. Popular among these religious leaders in Nigeria whose sermons and prophetic prayers saturate MTN caller tunes are: Pastor Enoch O. Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG); Bishop David Oyedepo, of the Living Faith Church also known as Winners Chapel; Pastor Chris Oyakilome of Christ Embassy also known as Believers Love World; and Pastor W.F. Kumuyi of the Deeper Life Bible Church. Ibrahim (2017) observe.s that the emergence of prophetic ministries in Nigeria intensified since the reimplementation of Shari'a in 1999 and subsequent emergence of Boko Haram insurgents in 2009, when many Christians felt they were being persecuted. As continued bombings of churches intensified in several cities across Nigeria, people drew closer to God and sought the services of prophets who could see into their fUture thereby guaranteeing them protection through prophetic prayers. Prayer as noted by Mbiti (1999:62) is a form of worship and an important part of every African society. Prayer is reported among all African peoples, although the prayers are not found in any written source. Citing examples with a number of ethnic groups, Mbiti illustrates that prayer plays a very significant role in the everyday lives ofAfricans. He gives specific examples thus:

> It is said that prayer, like making of sacrifices and offerings are at
> the heart of the Yoruba religious life. For this reason, people pray at
> any time and at any place, even when they are on the way to the shrines.
> Some of them go to the shrines to pray every morning
> before they speak to anyone else. The prayers are for material blessings and
> protection against sicknesses and death or for victory
> over enemies and longevity of life. (p. 61)

d) Excerpts of Sermons

One of the most popular sermons used by MTN is the evangelistic sermon of Pastor W.F. Kumuyi of the Deeper Life Bible Churches. Tlre excerpt from his sermon which is often subscribed and used as caller tunes reads: “Have you given your life to God? Have you repented of your sins? Are you born again? Do you love your neighbor as yourselP Are you free from sin?”It is interesting to note that Kumuyi's method of preaching is often evangelistic as seen above. Being the founder and general overseer ofthe Deeper Life Bible Church, PastorKumuyi attracted a large number of followers in the early 1980's in Nigeria. A number of his followers were attIacted to the ministry because of his emphasis on holy living and renunciation of u'orldly assets as they focused on the search for heavenly rewards which are not perishable. Consequently, material possessions such as electronics were viewed as things that contaminate the soul, so a lot of Deeper Life members lived very modest lives.

However, since the turn of the millennium, Deeper Life Ministry has shifted emphasis from the strict form of life style that renounces worldly possession to a more liberal approach to life where members could possess cars, houses, and all forms of electronic gadgets. In fact the use of recorded sermons of its founder during services is an indication that Deeper Life appropriates different forms of media to their advantage. Therefore, it is not surprising that Kumuyi's sermons were discovered as some ofthe sermons used by MTN for the benefit ofMTN subscribers.

2) Text Messages

Text messages were the most frequently used by MTN Nigeria before the introduction of caller tunes. The starting point of this study is an observation of the frequency with which text messages from MTN were received from the phone. This led to a collection of monthly MTN text messages between April 2014 and January 20 15. These collections revealed that several MTN religious text messages offered are categorized into various forms. For example one could subscribe to daily, weekly or monthly text messages of Bible verses, excerpts of sermons and prayer and all the text messages reflect various themes. Examples of theses offers are listed in the table below

S/N	Date	Text message	Theme
1	09/04/2014	\}llo! Get life -changing Bible quotes delivered to your phone. Text BQW to 700. Costs N50/wk	
	13/04/2014	Prayer is the answer key. Get daily words of prayer with MTN Play daily prayer service. Te xt DP to 700. Costs N50/wk"	Prayer
3	16/04/2014	Pastor Adeb oye's open Heavens APP on your mobile! Text OH to 5700 to download it & subscribe to a daily (Nia), weekly (N50 or monthly plan (NI(D)	DevotIonal
4	25/04/2014	Celebrate the resurrection of Christ with these powerful prayers. Hail Mary 010035. Lord's Prayer 010036, SMS song code **4** 10 to opt out SMS STOP to 33022(5036)	Prayer
	17/05/2014	The Lord shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ JesuBrovidence	
		For moreDravers/Confessions from RhaDsodv of realities text ROR to 5036.	
6	20/082014	Jer 9v23- TItus saith the LORD, Glory not in WISDOM, MIGHT and RICHES...Send 046379 to06/09/20144100 to inspire your callers for a better society Download at N50.	
	28/08/2014	Inspire your callers wi th ca llertunz Isaiah 43: 18& 19, Remember ye not the former things.... Behold, I will do a new thing.... Send 026077 to 4 100 at N50.	Hope
		As we enter the EMBER months, Rejoice in the Lord for the LORD is with you.	
		TEXT 023278 to 4100 to download tunes EBEZINA by Gospel Sensation PREYE @ N50 monthly.	
8	23/09/2014	Yello! Experience God's Grace by listening to daily meditation Guide on bITN Subsniplian	Grace
		Devotional Service @N 100 per month. Dial 450120 (TOLLFREE) now	
9	20/10/2014	Test your knowledge on Bible stories with Bible Quiz. What was the name of Jesus' Mother? A) Mary B) Martha C) Madam. Reply A, B or C NiO/SMS.	Quiz
10	21/11/2014	The Great shepherd will do a NEW THING. Inspire your callers with caller tunez Isaiah 4 3: 18 & 19... Behold, I will do a new thing... send 026077 to 4100 at N50	Hope
11	01/01/2015	Usher in 20 15 with your family and friends with this Thanks Giving song to thank and bless the Lord for His protection, SMS 10030 to 4100 for Amazing Grace	Tbanksgiving
12	15/01/2015	2015, our year of transformation, our year of progress. Vote your values, text 046020 to 4100 for your Rjghts 046030 to 4 100 for your Rights Pidgin Tunes	Hope

Various themes run through the text messages in the table above; examples are the theme of prayer, thanksgiving, hope, grace and providence. The innovative ways with which MTN appropriates religion is reflected in the ways the monthly text messages reflect various seasons. For instance No. 7 in the table shows that the user is approaching the month of September. This is a very significant month in Nigeria, together with the months of October, November, and December; these months are popularly referred to as the "ember months." 'Ember' originally referred to months that end in 'ember'; September, November and December. October got included as it could not be separated from others. They are months marked with a lot of activities that would eventually mark the Christmas and end of year celebrations and usher in the New-year, all of which are highly celebrated in Nigeria. Accordingly, a lot of travels are experienced during these months. "Ember" months are also believed to be characterized by a lot of calamities such as ghastly road accidents leading to loss of lives, armed robbery and kidnapping. Consequently, the term has been used by institutions such as the Federal Road Safety Commission of Nigeria to warn people

about the dangers of the "ember months". Media houses like the Plateau Radio Cooperation also airs television and radio programs aimed at creating awareness on the meaning of "ember months" and how dangerous the months are. Tbis phenomenon has created a platform for religious organizations to include in their programs, prayers and deliverance services aimed at protecting members from the spirit of the "ember months". Telecommunication agencies therefore use opportunities created by the introduction of such phenomenon to provide services related to it. Thus, text messages reflecting ember months and the prayers that go with them are frequently being offered and used by MTN Nigeria and its subscribers

Text messages and caller tunes reflecting different seasonal celebrations such as Christmas, Easter and New Year are also provided by MTN as can be seen in No. 10 where users could subscribe to songs ofhope as they approach a new-year. While **it** is difficult for one to have control over caller tunes as that is what a caller hears when they call someone's phone, ring tones can be controlled. The use of both ring tones and caller tunes show how religion can influence media practices due largely to customer appeal for religious products.

Discussion of Interview Responses

Diverse views emanated from respondents interviewed for the purpose of this study on the benefits of MTN caller tunes and text messages. While MTN users who have subscribed and are using one or more of the products offered by MTN are satisfied with the offers, others feel dissatisfied. The two views will be discussed in this section. One of the respondents who had subscribed to the daily prayer texts messages observes that: "MTN is doing a good thing, reminding you to pray every day...sometimes I don't remember to pray before leaving home...when the messages come; I say a quick prayer wherever I am". A similar response is: "MTN is using this medium to evangelize... and this is a good thing. Someone can read this prayer on his phone and get converted". These responses show that MTN prayer text messages, although unsolicited, are in a number of ways meeting the spiritual needs of its users. However, whether it leads to conversion is what has not been confirmed, as none of the informants got converted as a result ofthe messages.

Other responses from users who do not subscribe to MTN products although they get daily or monthly offers from MTN observe that: "MTN is trying to make money from people... you have to subscribe for 50 or 100 Naira, that is a lot of money . ..can you "times"(multiply) that with the population of this country?" This user feels that the messages are unsolicited, and are offered at the expense of the subscribers which if accepted are too expensive with no mutual derivation of benefit as only MTN benefits from it. Another user feels that: "MTN is intruding into my private life---I

never told them I wanted such offers". This user feels that MTN offers are a nuisance; they are sent unsolicited, without permission and sometimes are sent at very wrong hours of the day and this interferes with ones' private space. "MTN is forcing religion on me ... what if someone is not religious?" This MTN user feels that such messages should be sent only to users who are religious. Sending such offers to a non-religious person is a way of forcing religion on him/her because they are unsolicited. Lastly a user asserts that: "I just take it as one of those junk messages and I delete them as soon as they come... so it does not mean anything to me". To this user, MTN religious messages are junk messages and he makes no use of them because they are sent without the user's permission and he never subscribes to such messages.

However, looking from a broader angle, there's no doubt many Nigerians have a preponderance for religious activities. What do religious institutions have to say about these services offered by MTN? These unsolicited messages flood users' phones, the user may want them, but what in the end, verifies that these quotes and sayings are from the religious leader? Do Adeboye, Kumuyi, Oyedepo and Oyakhilome for instance, know that excerpts from their recorded messages are being used? These are questions that still beg for answers.

Digital Religion and Everyday Life in Nigeria

Everyday life is a concept in cultural studies and sociology and it is a concept that attempts to investigate how everyday is organized and given meaning in the society. Thus, daily activities are organized based on the availability of activities that characterize the day. For instance work, leisure and entertainment are defined by daily activities relating to them. One's choices of everyday activities are shaped by one's cultural, social and religious conditions. In addition, different media forms serve diverse purposes in different individuals' everyday lives. For instance, print media, radio and television have, over time, shaped how people use their everyday leisure and entertainment times. In recent times people have steadily increased their use of the internet over other forms of media. This increase in the use of social media has also necessitated the use ofhandsets. According to Eckert and Jones (2002, p.5): The everyday includes actions, which could be defined as the

> 'realm of routine' (Braudel), and also attitudes, which may be labeled mental habits. Another important aspect in the context of everyday life is ritual. On the other hand, as a marker of special occasions in the life of individuals and communities, ritual is often defined in opposition to the everyday. On the one hand, outsiders and visitors notice everyday rituals such as ways of eating or forms of greeting in the life of every society, which the locals fail to perceive as rituals at all,

The authors further observe that eeryday life differs from one continent to the other, thus what is observed as everyday in America or Europe is different from the African conception of everyday life. Everyday life in most Nigerian Christian families is defined by the daily ritual of prayer and meditations other\rise called family altar, morning devotion, morning prayers and in some circles, morning cry. It is believed that prayers offered in the early hours of everyday are effective enough to guide one throughout the day. Consequently, people subscribe to daily devotionals \\-hich have names that connote everydayness e.g., Every *Day With Jesus* , *Our Daijy Bread*, *our Daily MarIna* , *Daily Power/Guide* , etc., all reflecting the concept of everyday life. Therefore, the offer of daily prayer, songs, Bible verses and sermons by MTS to its subscribers is a reflection of the important roles these themes play in the lives of Nigerian Christians as everyday lives are characterized by the appropriation of these media for effective functioning ofdaily activities.

A number of factors account for the uses of MTN text messages and religious caller tunes. Firstly, Nigerians are extremely religious and the experiences of extreme religiosity are observed in diverse forms i.e. Proliferation ofprayer homes, prophetic ministries, solution houses and multiplicity of church/ministry membership. These ministries are often non-denominational, so they attract membership from diverse Christian denominations. Some are members in more than one ministry as someone said he sometimes attends three vigils in one night. This is a very unusual case but it explains how eager people are about their quest for religion. Writing on multiple church memberships in Kinshasa, Kamate (2009) observes that:

> It is easier for someone to remain a Catholic or other major protestant denominations but also to participate in the Pentecostal experiences that are available. This is especially true where participation in pentecostalism is carried out in part, through following Pentecostal radios, television, video and other media
> that enable one to live quite fully an evangelical spirituality in the privacy of one's home and still carry out worship in one's church of membership. (p. 147)

Retaining one's church membership and subscribing to the sermons or prophetic prayers of some other men of God is also a common practice in Nigeria. In fact, someone known to this author has confided to no longer attending church services on a regular basis but preferring to stay at home and listen to recorded sermons and prophetic prayers of a particular pastor. The quest for religion has given MTN the opportunity to offer such services to its users, so that one can subscribe daily to excerpts of sermons in addition to weekly church services.

Secondly, more churches are becoming charismatic in nature. One of the observable trends among churches in Nigeria today is that they have acquired practices common to Pentecostal and charismatic movements. As observed by Danfblani and Nguvugher, mainline churches are incorporating practices from Pentecostal churches as a way of training young members of the church who are often influenced by Pentecostal lifestyles. One of the notable characteristics is extreme dependence on "Men of God" or prophets as the link to getting delivered from certain problems. This over dependence on "Men of God" has led to increase in the use of their sermons and .prophetic prayers as ring tones or caller tunes. One informant observes that "whenever I hear the voice ofmy prophet, I feel some spiritual connection with him". Statements such as these illustrate how some "men of God" are perceived and revered, sometimes more than the object of one's religion.

Thirdly, existing competition in the religious market sphere has opened the doors for innovative ways in which religious organizations compete for membership. The proliferation of charismatic and Pentecostal ministries in Nigeria today is alarming. it has been observed that every day new churches are established in Nigeria. So the use of diverse means of competing and attracting people to a church or ministry has intensified the use of technology in the evangelization and recIuitment of members) which has been referred to as techno-religious spirituality. In this case) the telephone becomes a strong tool used for attracting members. ConsequentIY, daiIY text messages offered by MTN to subscribe to sermons of "Men of God ' serve as a means ofmarketing a church or ministry.

The Dynamics Between Religion and Mass Communication in Nigeria: **Applying the Market theory**

Religious market theory as put forward by Stark and Bainbridge (1987) are based on two assumptions: Firstly> "People are naturally religious, and religion meets human needs". In this sense therefore, every living being is considered a religious being. One of the major functions of religion in the society is that it answers the whY questions of life. Based on this assumption, religious products as offered by MTN, although unsolicited tend to meet the needs of individual subscribers since one of the many needs of humans in life is religion and the need for religion remains constant. As one of the informants in this study observed, "MTN is doing a good thing, reminding you to pray every day...sometimes I don't remember to pray before leaving home. . . when the messages come I say a quick prayer wherever I am". The need to pray as expressed in the quote above and the importance of praYer in general is reflected in most religious traditions and is founded on the religious belief that prayer is one of the most effective means of communicating with the divine or supreme being or some powers higher than one's self. Accordingly, prayer plays a

very significant role in the lives of Nigerian Christians, Muslims and other indigenous religious adherents. Ikenga-Metuh (1987) therefore observed that:

> Prayers for example, are found all over Africa. Mbiti's recent book *The* prayers *of African Religion'* demonstrates that prayers are much cherished in African religion. Prayers are made to God, deities and the ancestors. People pray for almost ever)rhing. Prayers are offered for children, for health, wealth, rain, good harvest, success in trade or hunting. A prayer would usually consist of an invocation to God or the deities to grant protection, good fortune or ward off an impending misfortune. It may express man's dependence on God and the confidence that He would bend to meet human needs. African prayers therefore are by themselves almost a deliberate exposition and explanation ofAfrican religion.

This excerpt from lkenga-Metuh's writing on prayer shows the essentiality of prayer among African people. Their expressions of the need to pray are evident in the manner in which prayer is appropriated not only in religious settings but also secular spaces such as markets and bus parks in many Nigerian urban cities (MbM 1999:62).

Secondly, "People make rational choices based on the costs and benefits of the available religious options". Religion is very attractive as it provides compensation where real recompenses are hard to find. It compensates by promising supernatural benefits. For example, immortality is unattainable but religion compensates by the promise of a life after death. In short, the rational choice theory can be best summarized in the following points as captured by Stark and Bainbridge (1987):

1) There is basic and constant demand for religion as people have a demand for compensators and rewards that only religion can provide.
2) Religious organizations are like businesses supplying religious products to meet the demands of consumers in the spiritual marketplace.

A number of the offers by MTN are messages of hope. These are sort of rewards which adherents are promised. Although these messages renect freedom and deliverance here on earth, they also have everlasting undertones i.e. of God doing a new thing in the life of His children which will culminate in eternity.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of the term Godfession tunes (meaning God confession tunes) by MTN Nigeria has provided an opportunity for its subscribers to consume a wide range of religious messages. The paper has argued that this myriad of products include religious caller tunes, ring back tones, text messages with Bible verses, etc.

Tbc messages as documented in this paper have various themes such as deliverance, victory, prosperity, prayer, evangelism and hope. The messages, although unsolicited, are welcomed as sometimes users may want MTN to remind them to pray every morning as indicated by one of the users. These new ideas/innovations from MTN are shaping the ways churches influence their congregations and also how religion is consumed in society today. As MTN reminds Christians about their every day routines of either prayer, hymns, sermons and Bible verses, religion is here viewed as also influencing media practices that may breach some of the laws governing telecommunication practice in Nigeria today.

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